



CONJUNCTIVITIS (PINK EYE)

What is conjunctivitis (pink eye)?

Conjunctivitis, most commonly known as pink eye, is an illness that causes inflammation of the whites of eyes and eye lids, causing the whites of the eyes to turn pink. Pink eye can be caused by bacterial or viral infection and allergic reactions to dust, pollen, and irritants like chemicals, contacts, or foreign bodies in the eye.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

All types of pink eye usually involve redness, burning, or itching. Symptoms of pink eye can vary depending on the cause of the illness:

- **Bacterial:** Symptoms include pink or red, itchy eyes with thick green or yellow discharge and irritation that may occur with an ear infection. Discharge often causes eyes to become crusted over in the morning. Bacterial pink eye can usually resolve without treatment in five to six days; however, individuals may be considered non-infectious after starting the proper anti-microbial therapy.
- **Viral:** Symptoms include pink, painful, swollen eyes with watery discharge. Cold or flu-like symptoms may be present. Often only one eye is affected, but within a few days it can spread to the other eye. Individuals remain contagious as long as they have symptoms. Viral pink eye resolves on its own over time.
- **Allergic:** Symptoms include red, itchy, teary eyes and normally it affects both eyes. Other allergic symptoms such as sneezing, itchy nose, and scratchy throat may be present. Allergic pink eye is due to an allergic response and is not contagious.
- **Irritants:** Symptoms include red watery eyes and mucous discharge. Swimming in chlorinated pools is a common cause of this type of pink eye. Pink eye caused by irritants is not contagious.

How is conjunctivitis spread?

The germs that cause bacterial or viral conjunctivitis may be present in nasal secretions and in the discharge from the eyes. Persons may become infected after touching a contaminated surface and then rubbing their eyes. Infection in one eye can easily spread to the other eye. Eyes can also become infected when a person uses contaminated towels or eye makeup.

Individuals with conjunctivitis but without fever or other symptoms may be allowed to remain at work or school with their doctor's approval. Those with symptoms, and whose work or school activities include close contact with other people should not attend.

Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology
24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156



Frequently Asked Questions

How is conjunctivitis treated?

- Bacterial conjunctivitis: A doctor can prescribe antibiotic eye drops to help limit spread and relieve symptoms, but drops are not always necessary. An individual is considered to be contagious until after treatment is administered for 24 hours.
- Viral conjunctivitis: There is no specific treatment recommended for viral infections. Over-the-counter eye drops may relieve some symptoms. Do not use steroid eye drops.
- Allergic conjunctivitis: There is no specific treatment recommended. Over-the-counter eye drops may relieve symptoms. A health care professional may be able to recommend other treatment options.
- Irritants: Consult with a health care provider to ensure there is no further injury. More specific recommendations may be made depending on the cause.

What can I do to prevent becoming infected or spreading an infection?

- Practice good handwashing.
- Avoid touching your eyes. If it is necessary to rub or touch the eyes, wash your hands.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as face towels, eye makeup, and contact lenses.
- Discard any eye or face makeup/brushes, products, or disposable contact lenses that were used while infected.
- Clean extended wear lenses, eyeglasses, and eyeglass cases thoroughly.

Do any special precautions need to be taken for children in day care?

- Ask the child's parents to have the child evaluated by a health care provider.
- Monitor the other children for signs of pink eye.
- Make sure all children and staff use good hand washing practices and hygiene, including proper use and disposal of tissues used for wiping the nose and eyes.
- Eliminate any shared items such as cloth towels. Use disposable paper towels.
- Disinfect any items that may have been contaminated.
- Children with pink eye do not need to be excluded unless they cannot participate or require more care than staff are able to provide without compromising the safety of other children.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/conjunctivitis/index.html>

Delaware's "Managing Infectious Disease in Childcare Settings" manual:
<https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/files/ChildCareManual2021.pdf>

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Page 2 of 2